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81: Love (And Other Weird Things) by cali-chan

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81: Love (And Other Weird Things)

Love (And Other Weird Things). PG-13, family/romance, post-S2, Mike/Eleven + Wheeler siblings.

"So... that's new." "What is?" "The 'I love yous.'" The Wheelers travel to New York to spend Thanksgiving 1987 with Nancy, and Mike is having trouble going two days without speaking to his girlfriend.

Note: This one goes out to **stellarstardust** at FFN, who missed the interaction between the Wheeler siblings in season 2 about as much as I did.

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Hosting Thanksgiving dinner for her visiting family was... an experience, Nancy thought, if she had to put it in one word.

On the one hand, "hosting" was perhaps overselling it, as her mother had gleefully taken over all the preparations despite the fact that they had only just arrived in New York on Thursday morning. That meant Nancy actually had very little to do as far as actual dinner was concerned.

On the other hand, having her mother continuously remind her of all the things she didn't know how to do or wasn't doing right was never fun. But then again, Nancy had been dealing with her mother for over nineteen years now, so she knew when to let things slide, and hey, as long as it got her out of cooking a turkey, she was fine with it. In the end she knew her mother said those things out of love, because she wanted Nancy to be happy— she just hadn't quite wrapped her head around the fact that Nancy's idea of happiness did not involve cooking and cleaning and decorating.

Thankfully the dinner itself went by without *too* much awkwardness (what little of it there was could be blamed on her clueless father, and most of them knew to just ignore him anyway). It was nice that her family was visiting— she *had* missed them— but she was glad she

didn't have to entertain them. The apartment she and Jonathan lived in was... tiny, to say the least, so her parents and siblings had to stay at a nearby motel.

Now, as Friday rolled around, Nancy was back to work (well, work from home, but work nonetheless), and her family moved on to enjoying their time in the Big Apple. Her dad was meeting with some old college friends of his who happened to live in the city, and Jonathan had taken her mom and Holly to a shopping mall— she hated hoisting them on him, but she didn't want them to get lost in the subway and he was going in that direction anyway.

Mike, who wasn't in the least bit interested on going shopping with his mother, had stayed behind at the apartment, officially to "spend some quality time with his sister" but in reality he'd spent most of the morning vegetating in front of the television while Nancy read through document after document at the dining table. He'd barely moved since he arrived, and Nancy had begun to think he'd fallen asleep with his eyes open, but honestly, she didn't mind; at least he was quiet so she could work without distractions.

She had literally just thought this when, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mike suddenly straighten up where he was sitting on the floor at the foot of the couch, suddenly turning to look just slightly to his left, away from where Nancy was sitting, like there was something there she couldn't see from this angle.

The first thought that crossed her mind was *God, please don't let it be a rat*— it wouldn't be the first time she encountered one through her year of living in New York City, but she hoped never to see one near or in her apartment— but then she saw him grin. "Oh, that's just not fair," she heard him mutter, though he didn't really seem upset with that big smile on his face.

Weird.

Now infinitely curious, she put down her highlighter and turned sideways in her chair so she could look at him directly. "What's not fair?"

Mike turned to her with a start, as if he had completely forgotten she

was around, or perhaps he just hadn't noticed he'd spoken out loud. Either way, because the apartment was so small, the kitchen, along with their dining table, and their sparsely-furnished living room were pretty much one room, so it's not like he could do or say anything she wouldn't notice or hear.

"Nothing," he said quickly— way too quickly for her to buy it— with wide eyes. "Um, can I use your phone?"

Weirder, Nancy thought, narrowing her eyes at him in suspicion. He hadn't actually seen a rat and was hiding it from her, had he? Nah, that didn't sound like Mike. "What for?" she asked, but then she frowned when it occurred to her that he had no one to call in this town. "Wait, are you calling home?"

"Yeah, I think El wants to talk to m—" He cut himself off abruptly for some reason she didn't understand (not that she understood much of his behavior in the past few minutes, anyway), before starting over. "I just need to talk to El for a bit. Can I?"

Nancy sighed, picking her highlighter back up again with a roll of her eyes. *Teenagers*. Not that she wasn't still one herself— for a couple more months, at least— but she was in college and living with her boyfriend, so that obsessive need to talk to her friends on the phone all the time had faded quickly once she moved out of Hawkins.

Mike had never particularly been as much of a phone person as she was, probably because he and his friends had those walkie-talkies they used all the time, but of course now that he was so far out of range he had no choice but to use the landline if he wanted to talk to his girlfriend.

It was such a rare occurrence that she couldn't help but rub it in a little. "Wow, Mike," she said as she tried not to laugh. "If you can't go two days without speaking to El, how are you going to survive college?"

He frowned at her the way he did sometimes at their parents, like she'd said something so eminently ridiculous he couldn't even believe the words had come out of her mouth. "What are you talking about? We'll be together in college," he stated as if this was a fact written in

stone.

It was an answer Nancy wasn't expecting, and her expression reflected that sense of surprise. "Oh, so you *are* making plans for college?" she asked in what she hoped was a casual tone, looking back down at the documents she had to read through for work and pretending to skim through them because she knew if she pushed him too hard he'd just clam up and shut the topic down altogether.

Even now that she was hundreds of miles away from her childhood home, she still found herself dragged into the family drama when her mother called once a week and invariably ended up complaining about Mike and how he kept putting off any decisions about college.

Now, Nancy had been through that particular brand of her mother's worrywart tendencies herself, so she wasn't particularly worried about Mike. He was a junior, so he still had time— and she knew he'd figure it out eventually. He was a smart kid, and he'd do well wherever he ended up. She did, however, want him to at least give their mother *something* so she wouldn't have to listen to her rant for an hour every time she called.

As if on cue, Mike groaned. "Come on, you sound just like Mom," he said with a frustrated shake of his head. "We haven't made any *plans*. I haven't even really thought about college yet. All I know is that I won't be apart from her. Wherever we go, we'll be together," he finished with a shrug.

She pointed at him with her highlighter. "As much as I applaud the sentiment," she said, trying to be the sisterly voice of reason, "you make it sound like it's so easy, but it's really not."

Mike glared at her. "Oh, I'm sorry, who's that guy you're living with, again? I thought he was your boyfriend, but I guess I must've heard that wrong," he threw at her, sarcasm dripping from his words.

She glared at him right back, because that's just what they did, but she still tried to clarify. "I don't mean it's impossible," she explained, "but Jon and I were lucky we both got accepted to colleges in the same city." She smiled, remembering how ecstatic they'd been when Jonathan received his acceptance letter from NYU a few weeks after

she'd gotten hers from Columbia— and even then it hadn't been a sure thing because Jonathan still had to work his butt off to save enough money. "It doesn't go that way for everyone."

"So I'll just go wherever she goes, or she'll go wherever I go." He brushed off her concern with a shrug. "It's not that complicated." The words chafed against every guiding principle in Nancy's life, but at the same time he sounded like he really, truly believed that, and when he was that determined, it was hard to dismiss it as just teenage cluelessness.

Nancy sighed. She still remembered how much Mike had changed during the year they thought Eleven was dead, how sad and angry he'd been, almost a mirror reflection of her own grief about Barb, even though they handled it differently. They had never been the closest, but she loved him, and everything they went through that year did bring them to a level of mutual understanding they'd never really had before that. After all, how many pairs of siblings out there could say they shared the worst day of their life?

She knew that his relationship with Eleven was one of those non-negotiable clauses that could easily alienate him if handled incorrectly. And she didn't want them to be apart any more than he did; she never wanted to see her little brother suffer like he had that year ever again. She just wanted to make sure he knew what they could possibly face, and she had to measure how to say that. "I just don't want you to be disappointed," she settled on eventually, in the most sincere tone she could muster.

He seemed to pick up on it, too, because his response was not as belligerent as it would've been had she phrased it differently. "I won't be," he assured her with an emphatic shake of his head. "Look, we haven't really thought about what we're gonna do yet. When we come to it, we'll figure it out." Well, that much she was certain of. "All I know right now," he continued, "is that I won't be separated from El, even if I have to live in a damn camping tent to make that happen."

She couldn't help a small giggle. That was stupidly idealistic, but it was also kind of adorable— which, she guessed, was an apt description of her weirdo of a little brother. "Aww, that's sweet," she

cooed at him, remembering that this entire conversation had started as an attempt to tease him anyway.

She knew the attempt worked because he grew flustered. "Yeah, whatever," he retorted, trying to pretend his cheeks weren't flaming red. "Can I use the phone now?"

Nancy contemplated that for a moment. "Okay," she finally admitted, and when Mike rushed to grab hold of the old rotary phone that lay on the small side table by their mismatched love seat, she quickly added, "But try to keep it short, will you? Long-distance calls are expensive."

"Seriously?" Mike frowned at her, having only managed to take the phone in his hands. "You work for the New York freaking Times."

"No, I *intern* for the New York freaking Times," she corrected, lightly swinging her highlighter against the pile of documents she still had to read for Monday. It was all research material; the paper had translators go through foreign documents (Russian, in this case), but then someone needed to go through them again, to make sure the English translations made enough sense, grammatically speaking, that they could be quoted if need be— a job that usually fell on some poor, hapless intern.

It wasn't really what Nancy wanted to do, but she was still a journalism-school undergrad and she had to start at the bottom rung of the ladder, so she powered through it even if it was tedious as hell. "That means I get paid peanuts, and most of it goes to pay rent, anyway," she further explained. Her parents did help with tuition and basic sustenance, and Joyce did send them what little she could afford once a month, but New York City was expensive so they both still had to work. "Either keep it short or forget about it."

He rolled his eyes at her. "Fine, I'll pay you back for the call," he counteroffered.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I will hold you to that," she warned him, and she absolutely would. She thought once she left home she wouldn't have to deal with Mike wasting her money and then never paying her back, but oh well. At least if he got it out of his system she

wouldn't have to listen to him whining about missing his girlfriend all afternoon, so she signaled for him to go ahead.

The smile was back on his lips as he grabbed the phone and, making sure the cord was not caught on the foot of the couch, sat himself down in the corner so he could make the call.

Nancy mentally patted herself on the back for being a good big sister. It had always been difficult to connect with Mike over the years because they had such different interests and priorities, but she'd learned over the past few years that it was actually pretty easy to make Mike happy— just don't get in the way of his time with Eleven, and you were golden. It really was rather cute.

She heard the clicking of the rotary phone as he disappeared behind the armrest of the couch. She wasn't sure how he'd managed to fit himself in the tiny corner between the couch and the side table— his legs were so long, she didn't know how that could ever be comfortable— but he probably thought that was the only measure of privacy he could get under the circumstances, never mind that she was only a few feet away from him and would be able to hear everything he said, regardless.

She briefly contemplated going somewhere else to let him have his moment, but given she lived in an apartment the size of a matchbox and with paper-thin walls, there was really nowhere she could go where she wouldn't at least hear *some* of the conversation. Plus, she wasn't about to just go outside and stand in the cold doing nothing until her brother finally decided he'd had enough of his girlfriend for the day, and she needed to make headway with her work anyway, or she wouldn't get a chance once the rest of her family came back.

So she decided to stay put and focus on the documents she was reading through; if she concentrated strongly enough, she might be able to tune Mike's voice out and he wouldn't be able to accuse her of eavesdropping.

Her resolve lasted about two seconds because her curiosity was piqued with the first words that came out of his mouth. "Hey, that's cheating!" was what he said, which was not what Nancy would've expected for a greeting to his girlfriend he had not seen or heard

from in over two days. Sure, her brother and his friends could get pretty weird, but this was pushing it. *What* was cheating, exactly?

"No, you *know* what I've been doing, I want to know what *you're* doing," was Mike's follow-up, and it only made Nancy even more confused, especially taking into account that she was only getting one side of the conversation. How would Eleven know what Mike had been doing?

"Nah, Dad's off somewhere and Jonathan took Mom and Holly shopping." There was a pause, then he laughed. "No, dummy; he didn't go shopping with them, he just took them there. He works nearby or something." More silence as he listened to her reply. "It's just me and Nancy here." Then there was a shuffle. "El says hi!" he yelled, raising his voice to indicate that last bit was directed at Nancy, rather than at El (not that it wasn't already pretty obvious).

"Tell her hi from me, as well," Nancy responded, quickly moving her gaze back down to the documents she was supposed to be reading, even though she knew he couldn't see her.

"Nancy says hi back," he dutifully relayed. There was a longer pause as he listened to whatever El was saying on the other side of the line. "Eh. Not much. It's been pretty boring—" More shuffling. "No offense, Nance!" he raised his voice again. Nancy didn't bother replying this time, and instead just rolled her eyes, going back to her work.

She heard Mike sigh. "Yeah. I mean, it just sucks that you can see me but I can't see you," he added in a downtrodden tone. That was the third odd statement he had made in just as many minutes and Nancy was beginning to think there was something she was missing here. Something about El's powers, maybe? "I know. Me too. Just two more days... I'll be back before you know it," he assured her.

"Hey, I know," he said after a series of thumps that told Nancy he was probably adjusting his position to make himself more comfortable, "let's just think of stuff we can do when I get back. What do you think?" Another laugh escaped out of him once he heard her answer. "I *told* you they wouldn't want to go see *Three Men and a Baby*. Not even Will?" Another pause. "Yeah. Don't worry, I'll go with you. Maybe we can catch a matinee next weekend. I'm sure it'll be

funny..."

From there the conversation turned to fairly non-weird, more mundane matters: trips to the arcade, Dungeons & Dragons campaigns, and what Thanksgiving was like for the Hoppers and Byerses (apparently with El's help, Mrs. Byers had managed not to overdry the turkey cutlets this year— something she was sure Jonathan would appreciate, so Nancy filed it away in her mind for future reference).

She managed to get quite a bit of work done as he talked— she stopped looking at her watch after the first fifteen minutes, but she was *definitely* collecting her money back from him in the near future, that was for sure.

Eventually, after what felt like hours (and she wouldn't be surprised if that's what it was— again: *teenagers*), the conversation started winding down, taking the enthusiasm in Mike's tone down with it. "That sounds fun. I wish I could've been there," he mumbled sadly after Eleven finished recounting, or so Nancy gathered by reading between the lines of Mike's responses, how she and Will had gone out to Castle Byers after Thanksgiving dinner to catch fireflies.

"I know," he sighed dejectedly, lowering his tone, probably in an attempt to keep his next words from Nancy's ears... but again, there was little chance of that in an apartment this size. "I just miss you. I don't like being so far away, it feels weird." There was some more shuffling around. "Yeah. Two days," he repeated, this time sounding more like he was reassuring himself.

"No, no, don't worry. I'm just being dumb." Eleven must've noticed his tone, too, because he rushed to explain himself. "I'll find something to entertain myself. You go have fun with the guys. Try and beat Dustin's skee-ball score, even if you have to use your powers. He needs to be knocked down a peg." He laughed, and Nancy could only imagine Eleven was laughing on the other end of the line. "Okay. Yeah, I'll see you Sunday night. I love you. Bye."

Nancy's eyebrows rose high on her forehead when she heard those last few words, and she couldn't quite school her expression back into nonchalance when Mike's form rose from behind the armrest of the

couch again. "So... that's new," she commented, knowing he'd know she was listening anyway, so she might as well ask.

"What is?" Mike asked in return, somewhat distractedly as he stood up and put the phone down on the side table where it was supposed to go.

Nancy put her highlighter down again, turned sideways in her seat to look directly at her little brother and, propping her elbow up against the back of her chair, rested her head against her hand. "The 'I love yous.'"

He paused halfway through a step, and she could see his cheeks going red, but to his credit, he didn't get defensive as she thought he might. "Yeah, well..." he mumbled, looking down at his feet, "you haven't been home in a while."

He sat down (on the couch this time, rather than on the floor) and studiously ignored Nancy's gaze. She couldn't help the smile that overtook her features. "Well, it took you long enough!" She pushed herself off her chair and walked the few steps that separated her from the couch.

She'd known her brother was in love with Eleven for a long time. Initially it had surprised her, mainly because they'd been so young. At twelve and thirteen, kids didn't necessarily fall that deeply; sure, middle schoolers developed crushes and even started "dating," if you could even call it that— and that's what she thought Mike's feelings were, initially: an unfulfilled crush, compounded by the loss of a friend. That could explain, at least to her, why Mike's mood took such a sudden turn after Eleven disappeared.

She knew it was deeper than that when she saw them reunite again after a year of not seeing each other. Learning that he'd been trying to contact Eleven every night for a year was a turning point for her; she didn't know that's what he'd been doing. She thought when he snuck down to the basement every night, he went there to play or plan a campaign, or even just to mope. It made her feel guilty in retrospect because she really should've known better. The fact that the blanket fort stayed up for so long should've been a clue, but it had gone completely over her head.

Moreover, it was something of a shock to her system because that's just not how your average thirteen-year-old with a crush behaved. That level of dedication and intensity was something beyond his years— it felt like something beyond *Nancy's* years, if she were honest— and to be frank, it scared her a little. It felt like he was in too deep way too early, and she didn't want her little brother to get hurt.

She really shouldn't have worried. Hearing stories about Eleven's year of seclusion and just seeing the two of them together, the way they interacted, the way their edges softened whenever they were in close proximity, the way Eleven looked at Mike like the sun rose behind him every day, more than erased any doubt in Nancy's mind that the feeling was mutual, and that it was real. Her brother had found *it*, that thing everybody in the world is looking for, and he'd found it at twelve. It was weird, but also very heartening.

Of course, the fact that they felt the feelings didn't necessarily mean they could wrap their heads around the *concept* of love, so it made sense to Nancy that it took them a while to finally say the words. She'd been around Mike's age when she first told Steve she loved him — and even then she hadn't been certain. She *thought* she loved him, tried very hard to convince herself that's what it was, but in the end she had to admit she'd made a mistake and deal with all the pain that caused.

She wasn't concerned about any of that when it came to Mike and Eleven; she was just happy for them. They'd been through a lot, and they deserved every bit of happiness that came their way.

She plopped down on the couch beside her brother, whose eyes were fixed on the TV in front of him even though whatever show he was watching was on an ad break at the moment, and smiled mischievously. "I mean, this is kind of a big deal, you know," she started, poking him in the arm with her finger. "I still remember a certain twelve-year-old telling me that the mere idea of him possibly liking Eleven was *gross*." She couldn't hold back a laugh when he threw his head back and looked up at the ceiling as if asking God for patience. "But now here he is, truly in love," she added in a dreamy tone, just to be extra annoying.

He groaned. "You are never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"Nope. Not ever," she replied, grinning broadly. When he rolled his eyes, she nudged him with her shoulder. "In all seriousness, though, I'm really proud of you, Mike." She patted his shoulder lightly. "And you know if you ever need advice about anything, you can call me anytime and I'll help."

He looked at her and gave her a smile— one small enough not to seem mushy, but large enough to seem sincere. "Thanks, Nancy."

"And I really do mean anything," she kept on speaking as if he hadn't said a word. "Like, if you need to know where to buy condoms without it getting back to either of your parents—"

"*Stop.*"

"Or the best spots by Lovers' Lake where you can park your car and be sure that Deputy Callahan won't find you. He's still around, isn't he —"

"We are not having this conversation."

"Or, of course, the best positions to—"

"I would rather go shopping with Mom than stay here and listen to this," Mike declared in a loud tone meant to drown out her words, springing up from the couch like it was on fire, and heading for the door like it was the most common thing in the world to go out into the late-November chill wearing an old sweatshirt, too-short jeans, and thin socks, as long as he could get away from this topic of conversation.

"Okay, okay, I'll quit it," Nancy rushed to pull him back, barely managing to grasp the back of his sweatshirt to stop him in his tracks. "Sorry, you're just too easy to tease," she admitted with a not-quite-remorseful smile that she hoped would pacify him. "Come back and sit. I gotta finish working anyway."

Mike glared at her but did as she said anyway, sitting down just as Nancy was getting up and going back to the dining table. A couple of steps in, however, she turned back around and looked at her brother.

"Hey, if you want, maybe we could do something fun tomorrow?" she offered, remembering that he had mentioned he was bored. "We could go to a museum, or the planetarium, or something."

Her brother looked back at her blankly for a minute, but eventually the overture seemed to mollify him. "Sure, that sounds nice," he replied with a shrug before going back to watching whatever show it was that he was supposed to be watching. Nancy went back to the documents she was working on and actually got pretty far.

Of course, that was until Mike, after like fifteen minutes of fidgeting incessantly, finally asked a question he seemed to be holding back for a while— and she tried really hard not to burst into laughter when it turned out to be about Callahan's patrol rounds around Lovers' Lake.

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Notes: Can we talk about the fact that Mike can *feel* Eleven when she's checking up on him in the void? Because it literally keeps me up at night. Like, I know Will and Terry also managed to communicate with Eleven through the void, but in both of those cases she was actively *looking* for them, okay? It's different with Mike and there has to be a reason for that and I just need the Duffers to *acknowledge* that on the show somehow or I'm going to go *insane*... *hyperventilates*

I am obviously not out of my "Let's Tease Mike Wheeler All Day Every Day" mood yet, but I genuinely hope his relationship with Nancy gets to this point circa 1987. I know from personal experience that a big sister's relationship with their annoying little brother can get more comfortable with time, especially as you transition out of adolescence. And like I said above, I missed their interaction in season 2. I want more of that in the future.

Remember the days when everybody was super intense about how expensive national long-distance calls were? I do! Also, it wasn't until the 80s that push-button phones started overtaking rotary-dial phones in the US. *Three Men and a Baby* was a comedy starring Tom Selleck and Ted Danson that came out on Thanksgiving 1987. It

doesn't strike me as the type of thing the rest of the gang would rush to the theater to see, but joke's on them because it was the highest-grossing movie that year.

Lastly, I just wanna repeat something I'm sure I've mentioned on Twitter at least once: If Nancy doesn't go on to study journalism, I'm going to be very disappointed. Just sayin'.